

BOOK REVIEW

Of Sense-Making, Introspection, and Social Awareness

Gomez, N. R. (2013). *Mindanao on my mind and other musings*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press. 255pp. Php 300.

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Mindanao on My Mind and Other Musings by Nikki Rivera Gomez is a compilation of editorials from the *Mindanao Daily Mirror*, articles from *MindaNews* and *Newsbreak*, essays (both published and unpublished), blog entries, and speeches written between 2003 and 2012. His book compels readers to make sense of pressing socio-economic, cultural, and political issues of concern to both Mindanao and the Philippine nation as a whole, and to take an introspective look at their role in promoting social awareness, peace, and development.

The 102 journalistic pieces in his book are organized into several themes: Presidents; Plunderers; Peaceniks; Press; *Panigan* (Taking Sides), Etc.; and Personals. In most of his essays, Gomez placed Mindanao at the forefront and center of his discussion and analysis, contextualizing issues relating to poverty, development, the environment, peace-building, and security. At the same time, he examined issues of national significance, such as government corruption and partisan politics, the implications of Martial law, human rights violations and extrajudicial killings, the challenges to integrity and independence encountered by journalists, and the consequences of the brain drain due to overseas labor migration, among others.

The first section of his book, “Presidents,” delves into the lapses and abuse of power by public servants, as well as the pervasive incompetence in government. Gomez did not mince words in criticizing the government for its dismal budget allocations for Mindanao, exacerbated by historic Manila-centric policies, extending to the lack of organized political action regarding the coconut levy fund that is now worth billions, at the expense of Mindanao-based traders:

Nothing much came out of that budget hearing—or other high-level deliberations of such nature. In fact, Manila’s glaring bias against Mindanao was manifested not only in the budget appropriations... Mindanao accounted for nearly 64 percent of the country’s total domestic production, and it was only right that it benefited from the fund “to raise the industry’s efficiency and productivity.”...But one reality remains constant: despite the years of advocacy, Manila isn’t budging. (pp. 10-11)

In his other essays, he lambasted the Arroyo administration for its failure to inform and consult the pertinent stakeholders regarding the terms of the failed Memorandum of Agreement

on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), thereby reinforcing a divided Mindanao, the risk of compromising democratic processes to rectify historical errors and oversights at the expense of the Bangsamoro, and the untold deaths and property damage among civilians as a result of the failure to contain problems with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). He also decried the institutional failure to dispense and serve justice, aggravated by transactional politics and the lack of political will, as demonstrated on multiple occasions in 2009: the pardoning of the mastermind of the 1990 murder of the couple Ernesto Bernabe II and Ana Lourdes Castaños, the granting of executive clemency to the convicts in the assassination of Ninoy Aquino and Rolando Galman, and the impartial probe of the suspects of the Ampatuan massacre in Maguindanao amidst the failure to end warlordism. To be sure, Gomez also criticized figures in the administration of President Benigno Aquino III, albeit in a surprisingly selective manner. The only figure the author took to task in the current administration was Vice President Jejomar Binay, on account of his refusal to accept a cabinet post contrary to his personal preference.

The second section of the book, dubbed “Plunderers,” provides a scathing critique of the deep-seated culture of corruption, which, according to Gomez, “has become endemic and widespread to the point of influencing otherwise God-fearing families to believe that ‘a little’ infraction won’t hurt anyone, or that relatives and friends have as much, if not *more* right to public positions than other individuals, qualified or not” (p. 41). On that note, his other essays delved into various instances of corruption, such as the 2005 exposé of underhanded dealings at the Department of Agriculture–Region VII, the 2007 pardon of former President Estrada by then-President Arroyo despite the former’s conviction for plunder, and the 2008 ZTE-NBE fertilizer scam. To his credit, some of his essays

explored the links between corruption and massive poverty and warlordism, particularly in Muslim Mindanao. He also fleshed out the disparities between the control of the pharmaceutical industry by big businesses and people’s limited access to health care, particularly in the impoverished provinces in Mindanao. In one of his stronger essays, “A Call for Sobriety,” Gomez called attention to the general public’s trivialization of Martial Law by invoking its possible return in the efforts to oust Arroyo, and stated how it could not be simplistically compared to contemporary social problems:

Nothing in the present dispensation, or even in the subsequent administrations after Marcos, could compare with the systematic repression of constitutional freedoms, the widespread torture and murder of suspected subversives, the hamletting and burning of entire villages, the employment of rape as a political weapon, and the rapacious plunder of the national wealth. (p. 38)

The book’s strongest section yet is its third section, “Peace-niks.” Drawing on his exposure to and involvement with the non-government organization (NGO) sector and civil society, Gomez uncovered the interconnections between the need for peace in Mindanao and its people’s ongoing struggles with poverty, the lack of education and sustainable livelihood, and crime and violence. He elaborated on the human and social cost of the historic armed conflict and the government’s military interventions in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM): “The curious thing is that, we keep on bombing our villages and nursing our evacuees, a cycle so bizarre that an official has named this: a ‘never-ending conflict’” (p. 79). In some of his essays in this section, he criticized the actions of local and international groups that organized conferences or rehabilitation programs in response to poverty, conflict, and age-old problems in Mindanao without coming up with

solutions beyond those with token beneficiaries. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of peace-building as a central goal of the government and even the business sector, and cited the efforts of international development organizations and private companies to promote literacy, health care, livelihood, and good governance and funnel their investments into the sites of armed conflict and resistance, so as to counter the trend of under-development in the region. He also recognized the efforts of civil society groups to promote interreligious dialogue and peace-building in Mindanao, both at the regional and national levels of government. In several essays, he issued a scathing critique of officials on account of their oversights in the peace process between the government and the MILF. In several moving essays, he spoke out against random, senseless acts of crime and violence in Muslim Mindanao. For instance, he wrote “The Evil Amidst Us” as an indictment of the November 2004 killing of photojournalist Gene Boyd Lumawag while photographing the sunset in Jolo, Sulu. In his essay titled “Secret Marshals,” he decried the beheading of principal Gabriel Canizares and the inability of the local government to catch terrorists and make them accountable for their barbarism. Meanwhile, in another essay titled “To Forgive and Forget,” he condemned the killing of a priest during an attempted abduction in Tawi-Tawi, as well as the ease with which a bishop purported to forgive the perpetrator. However, one essay in this section needs improvement. In “Humbling Truths for Our Jaded Negotiators,” Gomez made the following claims and generalizations about Muslim culture:

Government should answer why, despite the avalanche of foreign aid, Muslims in general remain backward, ignorant, and prone to violence.

Muslims, too, whether armed or not, must acknowledge that the feudal nature of their culture has spawned more problems

than virtues. Charges that Muslim politicians are wont to squander public funds may seem biased, as Christian politicians may even be worse. But such observations are based on experiences of even Muslims themselves, who see the lavish palaces, fancy vehicles, and garish jewelry of their own leaders—in stark contrast to the poverty that pervades their communities. (pp. 93-94)

It would have helped if Gomez had given concrete examples or even identified specific personalities to support the aforementioned claims, instead of simply resorting to patronizing descriptions and rehashing stereotypes about Muslims. Why single out feudalism within Muslim culture when this very trend pervades mainstream Philippine society, which is predominantly Christian? He correctly points out that there are underlying deep-seated, complex issues surrounding the peace talks, which have to be considered by both parties. However, rehashing racial stereotypes does not help the situation.

The section entitled “Press” contains various essays on the state of responsible journalism and press freedom in the country, as well as instances in which this is compromised and/or obstructed. Gomez acknowledged the extent of moonlighting among members of the press, but also detailed the challenges confronting community journalists, who are often poorly paid and thus rely on political patrons for support. He also wrote about exemplary cases of reporters maintaining integrity and journalism at its best, particularly in the coverage of the armed conflict in Muslim Mindanao, the peace process between the government and the MILF, and the atrocities committed by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). However, in the essay titled “Dangerous Minds,” Gomez somehow left the readers hanging when he defended the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for resorting to “irony as a literary device (sic)” (p. 165) in using the caption “SECURITY RISK?” sometime in 2012, when it ran a front-page photo,

showing President Aquino shaking hands with a Muslim woman in a burqa; how he framed the choice of caption as a literary convention, as opposed to widespread charges of bigotry against the broadsheet, was not clearly expounded on.

The section dubbed “Panigan, Etc.” features a wide variety of essays on social issues ranging from extrajudicial killings, to the crisis in agriculture, to environmental protection initiatives and the ills of such hazards of aerial spraying and contaminated watersheds, to social class disparities translating to inequities in educational system, and the “brain drain” and its effects on health care practitioners, among others. In one essay, titled “Mending Fabrics of Discord,” Gomez featured an interview with human rights lawyer Atty. Arellano on the criminal justice system and the state of democracy. Another essay, “In the Shoes of the Mayor,” exposed the perspectives of then-Mayor of Davao City Sara Duterte, who made the headlines for punching the court sheriff during the demolition of shanties in 2011. Yet Gomez implicitly justified her actions, as well as those of her father, in claiming:

Yet, in this postmodern age of swift justice and new heroes, it may be simplistic to judge Ms. Duterte as wrong, period. In ways that may not be palatable to polite society, modern leaders improvise, become more creative and daring to achieve results. Her father, for all his uncouth language, was like so, shunning the legal niceties in ushering one of the nation’s most livable cities since the John Wayne administration of Luis Santos. (p. 215)

Granted, Gomez may have “called a spade a spade,” to use his own words in recognizing the older Duterte’s actions as such, despite his referring to the latter as “our good mayor” (p. 194) in another essay in this section. However, one cannot help but wonder if the author was also skirting around the crucial issues at stake.

The final section, “Personals,” includes essays that literally constitute Gomez’ “Other Musings”

on such topics as music, theater, poetry, family-related anecdotes and tributes, and the fine line between religious devotion and fanaticism.

In sum, Gomez’s book is an interesting read, although his writing is unclear and even contradictory, in some cases. The reader cannot help but question whether he sidetracked the corruption of particular presidents, even as he lamented over the entrenched corruption in Philippine society. His other essays posed contradictory points. For example, he appeared to sidetrack the issue of electoral fraud by Arroyo by claiming we should be more caring about the “nation’s other cancers” (p. 42), while faulting people for their drive to “bring the heavens down over a wiretapped phone call,” without stating whether she should be held accountable. He also overstated the evils of corruption, as well as criticized the naivete of stakeholders, ranging from bishops to international aid representatives. To be sure, he did not mince words in calling attention to the ordinary person’s complicity in the system. Some of his essays are too short, but this is understandable if these were published as blog entries or editorials. Otherwise, he seems to break off instead of elaborating on his compelling assertions.